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BABBLE OF THE BOULEVARD

(Special Correspondence of THE COLLECTOR.)

THE recent acquisition on the part of Baron Alphonse de Rothschild of the portrait of Cæsar Borgia, a canvas which, until a few months since, held the most prominent place on the walls of the famous Borghese Gallery at Rome, has set us to wondering how the present owner managed to obtain this chef d'œuvre. The laws of Italy strictly prohibit the permanent expatriation of such artistic treasures. It is possible, however, that Prince Borghese, in order to consummate the sale of the picture, which, I need not repeat, brought 600,000 francs, himself suggested and argued in favor of its spuriousness. Not, of course, to the Baron, who knew well enough what he was buying, but to the Paccas of the Italian government. Something of the sort must have been done, or the Borgia could not have been taken out of the country. Meanwhile Italy's loss has been France's gain, and one of the most celebrated of Raphael's (?) masterpieces will henceforth serve to fill a gap on Rothschild's wall, and leave one that may never be breached over in the musée of the Eternal City.

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If it be permissible for a titled Italian connoisseur to question the authenticity of one of his own canvases, it will surely not be a matter of bad taste for me to do the same. I am curious to know, then, admitting for argument's sake the genuineness of the picture, how it was possible for the artist to paint the portrait of a man who, when he (Raphael) arrived in Rome was the inmate of a prison cell, afterwards exiled to Naples, subsequently shut up in a Spanish fortress, and suffered the pain of death in 1507, a full year before the pupil of Pietro Vanucci settled in Rome. Did Raphael receive permission from Pope Julius II to visit Cæsar in his dungeon, or did he stumble across him under the shadow of Vesuvius? If it was not then that the portrait was made, it must have been painted somewhere about 1500 or later, when the artist was but 17 or 18 years of age. And yet at this period his time was divided between Florence, Perugia and Siena, busy in assisting Perugino and Pinturicchio, the latter of whom charged him with the work of decorating the Library of Dome. Borgia was then on his way back from France, where he had been negotiating an alliance with Louis XII. If the portrait really is from the brush of the immortal Italian, it is certainly at this period that it must have been painted, and not when the incestuous son of Alexander VI was languishing in limbo. Firm, erect, the hand grasping the hilt of his sword, Cæsar Borgia carries on his squarely set shoulders a strong, vigorous, well-proportioned head. The face has a touch of melancholy about it, while the lines that fall from the nostrils and those between the brows denote a marked degree of malevolence and cruelty. As well do the ferocious eyes, prominent cheek bones and sensual under lip bespeak the inhuman character of the brother and lover of Lucrezia.

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Three Raphaels now remain in the Borghese Gallery at Rome. Amid the Corregios, the Botticellis, the Andrea del Sartes and the Domenichinos, the visitor may still admire these studies of the master. "The Cardinal" is one, "The Interment" another, and the third "The Wedding of Alexander and Roxane." The Parisian banker, however, is not the first who has had a hand in the depletion of the artistic gems of the collection. In 1807 Camille Borghese sent a number of carvings and figures to France, and Louis XVIII in returning them, eight years later, retained the "Gladiator" and the "Hermaphrodite," which are still to be seen at the Louvre. A repetition of this would scarcely be possible to-day. Every once in a while we read of the prospective sale of the collection. Gammon! King Humbert and his successors will take good pains of its not being accomplished.

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In April of this year the Municipal Council invited competition for a statue of Beaumarchais to be erected on the Boulevard called by his name. Over one hundred sculptors have responded, but very few of the models submitted, and which are at present on exhibition in the Champ de Mars, will, I fear, even be found worth considering by the jury. There are, nevertheless, some extremely good figures among the lot, and the ones which should merit attention are those from the ateliers of Albert Lefeuve, Deloye, Allouard, Roussaud, Granet and Bernard Steuer. Without the slightest disposition to ridicule the work of a number of promising men, I cannot but say that most of their models would not pass for the author of "Le Mariage de Figaro" unless branded and labeled as such. Steuer's statue, which is certainly a likeness of the dramatist, represents him standing at the side of his chair dressed in his favorite gown with its collar of fur, half open at the neck, and through the folds of which is visible the frilled point lace shirt. Beaumarchais was vain and very correct in his attire. His dressing gowns were a wonder to behold, both on account of their richness and the eccentric taste of the wearer. Attention to such details on the part of a sculptor is precisely what is wanted nowadays. To neglect them is to neglect accuracy of composition. The head of Montesquieu can never be made to fit on the shoulders of Descartes, or the features of Le Sage do duty on a bronze of Fenelon.

For a long time rumors have been diligently circulated to the effect that at the opening of the School of Fine Arts the classic neighborhood of the Rue Bonaparte would run with gore. War to the knife was expected between the native and Transalpine models who pose before the budding painters and sculptors of the antique Hôtel de Chimay. The quarrel was attributed not to the growing animosity between the Republic and the successors of the Crispi ministry, but to a local and meaner cause. The French models were up in arms because the Italians worked at cheaper rates and were employed with more frequency than they. Hence the terrible stories which were calculated to disquiet the tranquil print-sellers, bouquinistes and general trades people of the street in question, wherein the principal entrance to the Ecole des Beaux Arts is situated. But for all these reports the term opened in the usual manner, and those who went across the river in order to witness the anticipated rioting were egregiously disappointed. Some dozens of picturesque but unkempt Italians hung about the monumental gate of the institution in the dull, cold morning air, but none of them were molested. Later in the day, when they trooped back to their slums at Montmartre or in the Gobelins district, they were equally safe from insult and injury, and did not need the protection of the few extra police posted near the school. The directors say that all models are paid at the same rate, and that natives are employed as well as foreigners whenever they exhibit the necessary physical qualifications. The French, on the other hand, reply that the Italians are the favorites with the artists, despite their undeniable squalor, and that sooner or later, like the Chinese, they must go. Thus the animosity increases, until ultimately it may assume the dimensions of a street squabble, which at least may have the effect of putting an end to the whole affair. Tant mieux!

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The announcement the other day of the death of P. J. Martin, art dealer, expert and connoisseur, set more than one of us a-thinking over the career of a man who in his special field achieved a success second to none, and who was known to every collector in Paris. Martin, if I am not greatly mistaken, came up to Paris from the mountains of the Jura and commenced life as a saddler. In the meantime he was seized with the unconquerable desire to become an actor, spent his nights reading Moliere and Racine and his days in repeating the lines committed to memory from their satiric pages. Finally the fever reached its height, and the youngster renounced his prosaic straps and buckles for the more poetic sock and buskin. But his connection with the stage was of short duration. He developed a new craze, and immediately became a dealer in bric-à-brac and paintings. He bought fearlessly, and often had first choice from the ateliers of those who have since been relegated to the Calendar of Saints. My acquaintance with Martin was only of recent date. Some time before his death he occupied an apartment in the Rue St. Georges. It was here that I met him, and it was here also that I had many interesting interviews with him, when the fire blazed brightly on the hearth and when the inclemency of the weather without precluded all possibility of intrusion. Here, also, to the soft whisperings of his trembling voice and the tracings of his bony fingers have the men of 1830 passed in review; not as we know them by the glory of their work, but as Martin knew them in flesh and blood. Peace to the old man's ashes! But for him and his untiring industry the world of art might be a little farther backward than it is to-day.

JOHN PRESTON BEECHER.

PARIS, November 20, 1891.

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Mr. Wesley Webber, an artist long and favorably known in Boston, has transferred his studio permanently to New York, after a successful exhibition by way of farewell to his native city.